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Pre-Service Teachers' Growth In Understandings of Best Practice Literacy Instruction Through Paired Course and Field Experience

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Abstract

Illiteracy is on the rise in the United States, and the potential negative impact on today's struggling reader is devastating. Now more than ever, preparing pre-service teachers to be effective teachers of literacy is crucial. This study examined the growth in understandings of best practice literacy of eleven pre-service teachers through paired course and field work. Results reveal that through paired course and field work, growth of best practice literacy instruction is shown by pre-service teachers' enhanced abilities to define, assign importance, and relate to implications for student learning as well as develop efficacy around their use. Results of this research have an impact on teacher preparation programs and highlight the importance of engaging pre-service teachers in literacy experiences that are connected to the course and field to better prepare them to meet the challenges of ensuring all students grow to be literate individuals.



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Introduction

Today's struggling readers will face many obstacles as they progress through school. These may include a higher likelihood of being retained in school, being incarcerated, and living in poverty. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimated that over \$2 billion is spent each year on students who repeat a grade due to reading problems (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015), while the U.S. Department of Justice revealed that 60% of America's prison inmates are illiterate, and 85% of all juvenile offenders have reading problems (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003). Further, the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) revealed that 14% of adults over the age of 16 read at or below a 5th grade level and 29% read at an 8th grade level (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Among those with the lowest literacy rates, 43% live in poverty.

Combating illiteracy has become a national problem, but effective teachers can provide the solution. There is strong agreement that schools will succeed only when teachers have the expertise and competence needed to teach reading effectively (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). Research from the International Literacy Association [ILA], formerly the International Reading Association, concluded that putting a quality teacher in every classroom is key to addressing the challenges of reading achievement in schools (2007). Because colleges and universities prepare 80% of today's teachers, increased attention to the formal training of pre-service teachers in the area of literacy is necessary (United States Department of Education, 2013).

At the university level, coursework and field experience have often existed as a theory/practice divide, with one having little influence on the other. Research revealed that excellent teacher education programs engage beginning

teachers in a variety of field experiences in which they have opportunities to use their coursework and interact with excellent models and mentors (ILA, 2007). Darling-Hammond (as cited by Scherer, 2012) asserted how important it is to create coherent programs for pre-service teachers in which all of the courses are connected to clinical work. She described these programs to be those where, “the student learns specific practices, goes into the classroom and works on those practices, and then brings the experience back, debriefs, problem solves, learns some more and takes it back to use in the classroom” (p. 20). Creating pre-service teachers who are highly prepared for the demands of today’s classroom can be supported through the coherent combination of course and field work.

The purpose of the present research study was to examine how pre-service teachers change and grow in their understandings of best practice literacy instruction when course and field work are closely aligned. The present research sought to answer the following question: In what ways do pre-service teachers grow in their understandings and beliefs of best practice literacy instruction through unified course and field work?

Literature Review

Pre-service teachers need specific learning opportunities to become effective teachers of literacy. The ILA (2010) identified Curriculum and Instruction as well as Assessment and Evaluation among their six standards for Pre-K and elementary classroom teachers in regards to teaching reading. Instructional approaches and materials are the fundamental tools of reading instruction (Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2010). Pre-service teachers must be equipped with a solid understanding of best practice literacy instruction that is based on research and theory. Pre-service teachers can learn to implement effective literacy instruction based on knowledge gained from their teacher preparation programs (Fazio, 2000).

As with instruction, assessment is an important area for pre-service teachers to understand and experience. According to the standards set by the ILA in 2010, elementary teacher candidates must be able, for example, to interpret and use assessment data to analyze individual, group and classroom performance and progress, use assessment data to plan instruction systematically, use evidence-based rationales to make and monitor flexible

instructional grouping options for students, and use various practices to differentiate instruction. Without formal preparation in assessment methodology, beginning teachers struggle with translating diagnostic data into effective teaching strategies. With such preparation, those same teachers are able to pinpoint areas of concern and weaknesses in their own teaching (ILA, 2007).

Two of the best practices in the areas of assessment and instruction are running records and guided reading. Running records serve as a systematic observational tool that teachers can use to guide instruction. Clay (2005) insisted, “in every way, the information produced by systematic observation reduces our uncertainties and improves our instruction” (p.3). There is consistent evidence that the use of formative classroom assessment like running records distinguishes exemplary from ordinary teachers (Ross, 2004). Therefore, pre-service teachers must be well informed regarding the benefits of using formative assessment, such as running records, in the classroom.

Guided reading has been noted as an effective form of reading instruction for decades (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Fountas and Pinnell (1996) confirmed that most descriptions of comprehensive literacy programs now include guided reading as one of the essential components. Guided reading can assist students in their growth as readers, if teachers can effectively implement the process of creating and managing flexible groups, making it of high importance in teacher education (Ferguson & Wilson, 2009).

Effective Pairing of Course and Field Work

Uniting course and field work is key to effectively preparing pre-service teachers. Coursework and content knowledge provide pre-service teachers with a base of knowledge, which is then further developed through live teaching opportunities in the form of a field experience component. Field experiences are needed as a means to transition pre-service teachers from an academic world to a field based learning environment (Retallick & Miller, 2010). Carter and Anders (1996) contended that the skills students develop in the academic world are considerably different than the skills needed to learn from their own teaching and field experiences. Because of their importance to professional learning, field experiences for pre-service teachers have been compared to medical student internships and residencies (Huling, 1998).

Field experience opportunities allow pre-service teachers to focus on the actual process of teaching. This method of supervised practice for pre-service teachers can provide valuable learning and development of both knowledge and skill related to teaching reading. The National Research Council (2010) has considered systematic, structured field experiences to be one of the most critical aspects of effective teacher preparation. Likewise, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2010) has recommended field experiences as essential to the reform and improvement of teacher preparation programs. Heibert and Morris (2012) assert that working directly on improving teaching, the methods used to interact with students about content, is the most productive option for improving classroom instruction.

Helfrich and Bean (2011) identified the importance of marrying the components identified as crucial to the development of a successful teacher preparation program: coursework (content knowledge); field experiences closely related to coursework and content knowledge; and collaboration among members of the “triad” (p. 245). The authors further acknowledged that both coursework and field experiences appear to be critical elements of teacher preparation programs, allowing teacher candidates to gain knowledge of concepts and put into practice what they have learned, thus helping to prepare them to teach literacy. Ensuring the coursework and related field experiences provide opportunities for teachers to develop their understandings in a learn-by-doing environment is essential for successful preparation of teacher candidates. This purposeful pairing of coursework and clinical field experience allows pre-service teachers to identify linkages between theory and practice (Retallick & Miller, 2010). Many universities are making changes in their programs to offer strong clinical experience connected to coursework (Scherer, 2012). Field experience opportunities are significant to the development of understandings of the ways in which pre-service teachers learn to teach literacy. In addition, Freeman (2010) offered that in order for these field experiences to benefit pre-service teachers, they should be well planned in positive learning environments with quality educational professionals and institutions.

Methodology

The research followed eleven pre-service teachers enrolled in a reading methods course with attached elementary field experience in the Spring of 2014.

During this time, pre-service teachers were given opportunities to learn and implement two important literacy strategies: running records and guided reading. A researcher-developed survey about pre-service teachers' understandings (definitions) of and beliefs about the overall importance of running records and guided reading were completed at both the beginning and end of the semester. Written reflections were collected after the participants were able to learn about and have hands-on experience with running records and guided reading in both the university and elementary classroom.

Participants

Eleven pre-service teachers enrolled in a three-semester hour reading methods course (Early Childhood Education; Reading Methods) with an attached field experience were asked to participate in this semester long research study and given the option to decline participation in the study with no impact on their grade. None of the pre-service teachers had professional teaching experience, nor did they yet hold a teaching license. All pre-service teachers were undergraduate or post-baccalaureate students (seeking teacher licensure) and ranged in age from 22–43. All but one of the students were female. Participants were primarily Caucasian, with the exception of one Asian American participant.

Coursework and Field Placement

The course was held at a branch campus of a small, private, four-year University in central Ohio. Prior to teaching in the field component, pre-service teachers engaged in coursework that was assisted through constructive feedback of lesson plans, clear instruction and modeling, as well as in-course practice. As the course proceeded, pre-service teachers were taught to administer and analyze running records and instruct students in guided reading groups. Pre-service teachers gained experience with these literacy components through readings, discussions, videos, modeling, practice, and ultimately, engaging in live teaching experiences using these literacy strategies in the field.

For the field component, the pre-service teachers were placed in K–3 classrooms throughout central Ohio. The field sites varied in size and socioeconomic status and were selected based on current agreements with the university. Mentor teachers all taught an English/Language Arts block and were selected based on willingness to participate and a commitment to model and

support understandings of best practice literacy instruction within their classrooms.

Each pre-service student had a supervisor that observed and evaluated their teaching in the field three times throughout the semester. These supervisors held scheduled meetings with the pre-service teachers and mentor teachers where constructive feedback was given based on these observations. Mentor teachers, supervisors and the instructor collaborated to ensure basic expectations of the field experience were met by the pre-service teacher (ex. attendance, participation and assignment requirements).

Researcher

The instructor of the course also served as the researcher, serving in multiple roles. For example, the instructor of the course directly supervised the pre-service teachers, mentor teachers, and supervisors to ensure clear expectations and common understandings existed throughout the course and field. The instructor taught and assigned the content, then worked with the mentor teachers and supervisors to ensure the students were able to practice in the field the learned content in the coursework.

Procedures

The research study selected running records and guided reading as two key areas to support literacy instruction. Pre-service teachers' understandings of these two areas, as well as their impact for teaching, were developed through course and field experience opportunities. These two areas were chosen because of their clear impact on assessment and instruction to support literacy development in children.

After extensive, in-class learning opportunities surrounding running records and guided reading, pre-service teachers were then able to apply this learning in the field. Prior to pre-service teachers teaching guided reading in the field, they were first required to administer a running record assessment on each child in their guided reading group to identify their instructional level, reading strengths, and areas of targeted instruction. Additionally, running records were administered on each child in the guided reading group at the end of the lesson series to track individual student's progress. Once the initial running records were administered and analyzed, pre-service teachers were required to teach 12

guided reading lessons throughout a four-week period during the semester. Each guided reading group consisted of 3-6 children.

Pre-service teachers learned about running records and guided reading through their coursework, but were then able to practice these newly learned skills with actual students. As future literacy teachers, knowing how to use these best practice literacy strategies to support instruction contributes to the success of the teacher. Research by Dawkins, Ritz and Loudon (2009) confirmed the importance for pre-service teachers to develop a wide range of literacy teaching practices, especially those that rely on deep knowledge of literacy concepts and skills to be a more effective teacher.

Instruments

Eleven surveys were completed at the beginning of the course (January) and at the end of the course (April). The surveys consisted of open response questions and a Likert scale. Pre-service teachers were asked to rate the importance of running records and guided reading in overall reading instruction by using a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not at all important and 5 being extremely important. The surveys were designed to identify the participants' basic knowledge about running record assessments and guided reading. Likewise, pre-service teachers reported on their understandings of the definitions of each, as well as the impact of running records and guided reading on literacy instruction. The survey questions were as follows:

1. Define ("running record"/ "guided reading").
2. Do you think (running records/ guided reading) are valuable teaching tools to use with students? Why or why not?
3. On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being not important and 5 being very important, how would you rate using running records in the classroom to enhance student learning?

Pre-service teachers completed reflections throughout the course as they finished their experiences with running records and guided reading. Reflections consisted of one question each that asked the pre-service teachers to reflect on their personal experiences in the field related to the literacy topic (running records/guided reading). Pre-service teachers were encouraged, in their reflections, to summarize their familiarity, understandings, and beliefs of

the effectiveness of these literacy components and their impact on instruction. The reflection questions were as follows:

1. After learning about running records and their uses, and using running records to assess student reading abilities and plan instruction, reflect upon your personal experiences in the field using running records, specifically how you see them contributing to both your teaching and the students' learning.
2. After learning about guided reading and the necessary components of a guided reading lesson, and having the opportunity to teach students using multiple guided reading lessons, reflect upon your personal experiences in the field using guided reading, specifically how you see guided reading contributing to both your teaching and the students' learning.

Data was collected through pre and post surveys and reflections. Pre-surveys at the beginning of the course were collected before any instruction, discussion, or field opportunities were available. Two reflections per pre-service teacher (22 total) were completed after they were able to learn about each of the literacy strategies (guided reading and running records), discuss, practice and reflect on the overall success in the field. Post surveys were collected at the final course meeting, when all learning opportunities for the methods course and field experience were complete.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed for differences from the initial surveys to the final surveys. The open-response questions from the survey as well as the reflections were coded to identify themes in understandings, opinions of effectiveness, confidence, and likelihood of pre-service teachers to use these strategies in their future teaching. First, definitions of literacy strategies from pre to post were compared to identify stronger, more accurate understandings in definitions and understandings of the two focus areas (running records and guided reading). Then, the scales indicating overall importance were compared from pre to post to identify gains. Finally, additional understandings and opinions from reflections were then further examined.

Growth in Understandings of Best Practice Literacy

Likert items were analyzed to reveal if pre-service teachers' opinions of the importance of specific literacy topics, running records and guided reading, had changed over the course of the semester. Likewise, the ways in which participants viewed how use of the literacy strategies could enhance their future teaching were noted. Definitions of running records were analyzed (pre and post) using three components of an accurate definition: Running records are (1) an assessment (2) used to observe reading behaviors/strategies and (3) helpful to plan instruction to meet student needs. Definitions of guided reading were coded (pre and post) using four components of an accurate definition: Guided reading is (1) planned, small group reading instruction (2) teacher supportive (3) allows for differentiation within the lesson based on strengths and weaknesses and (4) used to monitor reading progress. The post reflections were analyzed to reveal further emerging themes of understanding among the participants.

Results

The results of this study confirm growth in pre-service teachers' understandings, definitions of and feelings of importance in specific areas of best practice literacy as evidenced by examining pre- and post-surveys. Results are further supported by the opinions, ideas and consolidations made within the final reflections. Results reveal that through paired course and field work, growth of best practice literacy instruction is shown through pre-service teachers' enhanced abilities to define, assign importance, and relate to implications for student learning as well as develop efficacy around their use.

Prior to Course and Field Work

Initial surveys reveal that pre-service teachers were unfamiliar with, or only somewhat familiar with, running records. Likewise, these surveys reveal many inaccurate definitions of running records. For example, one student initially defines a running record in these words: "A running record is when a teacher reads a student a text over and over." Three of the eleven participants identified running records as an assessment tool while seven of the eleven participants identified running records as providing insight into student reading behaviors. Only one of the eleven participants identified running records as a teaching tool to guide instruction. Participants rated running records either with a 3, 4 or 5, indicating they believed them to be of medium to high importance.

Pre-surveys reveal that six pre-service teachers had a limited understanding of guided reading, defining it as a student reading while the teacher listens, or teachers helping only when needed. Five of the eleven pre surveys indicate the pre-service teachers gave an inaccurate definition of, or had no experience or knowledge about guided reading. Examples include, “students read with an interactive device” and “I have not heard the term before.” One student reveals incorrect understandings of guided reading while providing a definition on the pre-survey. He writes, “Guided reading is a reading done with a student and teacher that gives help if needed.” In terms of importance for overall reading instruction, the likert scale shows that all participants began the course believing that guided reading was of medium to high importance, rating it between a 3 and 5.

It is interesting to note that, though pre-service teachers showed limited to no understanding of the literacy terms *running records* and *guided reading*, they all believed them to be important concepts. One possible explanation for this perceived importance is that they had heard the terms spoken by teachers before, either in their university coursework or their field placement classrooms, which made them believe they were necessary practices, even though they did not yet know how to perform them, or what exactly they were used for. Further, it is possible the pre-service teachers initially believed the literacy terms to be important concepts simply because they were the focus of the survey.

Post Course and Field Work

Post surveys and reflections revealed clearer understandings of running records and guided reading and their importance in relation to literacy instruction; sample pre- and post-statements are included in Table 1. The same student who showed misunderstandings in the pre-survey revealed stronger understandings of the purpose and implications into teaching that running records possess in the post-survey, as evident by her comment:

A running record is an assessment (formal or informal) used to see how fluent a reader reads and what cues they use to make errors and self-corrections. Running records show the student’s reading strengths and weaknesses and are used to guide reading instruction.

All participants were able to successfully identify running records as an assessment tool as well as being used to guide instruction. Ten of eleven participants noted that running records were used to observe and record student reading behaviors. Post survey Likert scales revealed all participants used a rating of either 4 or 5 to indicate their opinions of importance in using running records to support reading instruction. The overall gains in the Likert scale were 10 points.

Reflections identified three themes in regards to running records: 1) running records are very useful in the classroom; 2) running records are used to differentiate and plan instruction; and 3) administering running records takes time and practice, but pre-service teachers' confidence has grown through practice. Reflections support enhanced understandings and allow pre-service teachers to reveal how the combination of course and field work has supported their growth as teachers. Examples include calling running records an "eye opening experience," "now viewing running records as a much needed tool to identify the specific areas of reading that need further supported," and "an accurate assessment that allows the teacher to tailor the instruction to increase progress of the student."

Post-surveys, in combination with reflections, revealed an increase in understandings and abilities to define guided reading. The same student with incorrect understandings in the pre-survey revealed, in the post-survey, a much deeper understanding of guided reading:

Guided reading is a small group reading lesson guided by the teacher. The teacher supports the reading through close observation of all students while developing decoding, fluency and comprehension skills by reading texts at a similar level or interest of the students in the group. This instruction allows teachers to monitor progress of students and differentiate their instruction.

All participants were able to identify guided reading as an important component of reading instruction used to enhance reading abilities. Ten of the eleven participants identified guided reading as planned, small group instruction while eight of the eleven participants noted that guided reading was teacher supportive. Nine of the eleven participants included guided reading as differentiated within based on student strengths and needs. Finally, six of the eleven participants noted that guided reading was used to monitor student

reading progress. The Likert scale on the post surveys revealed that all 11 participants rated guided reading of high importance (5) as a contributor to reading instruction and show an overall gain of eight points.

Reflections show that pre-service teachers valued learning about guided reading and the opportunity to apply this learning in the classroom. Examples include feelings of confidence teaching guided reading. One student stated,

I really enjoy guided reading groups. I felt so productive working in small groups and focusing my instruction specifically to their needs. I saw progress over the 12 lessons and felt like I was really teaching and making a difference.

Another student stated,

As a teacher-in-training it was absolutely necessary to have this experience of creating the lessons, teaching the lessons and being able to find the teaching points for each student to differentiate instruction. I more clearly understand the importance of guided reading and it's potential impact on student progress, as well as the data collection that goes along with it.

Connections Revealed

Favorably, pre-service teachers' reflections showed a link between formative assessments (running records) and planning differentiated, small group reading instruction (guided reading). Throughout their reflections, pre-service teachers made connections between the importance of informal assessments in the form of running records to guide teaching decisions, book choice and grouping for guided reading instruction. Pre-service teachers also noted the importance of instructing students at their instructional level based on the information gained through data collection (running records).

Pre-service teachers' reflections showed that they connect running records to formative assessment, citing the importance of using running records to inform teaching decisions. At the conclusion of the research, students believed running records to be important in identifying students' reading level, strengths and weaknesses of the reader, and areas in which to target instruction. Pre-service teachers also noted the importance of analyzing running records to understand specific decoding behaviors.

Pre-service teachers discovered that running records allow fluency understandings and specific reading behaviors to be revealed. They found running records to be *tools to guide instruction* and identified strengths and weaknesses of the reader. Pre-service teachers understood that taking accurate running records requires much practice, but that the administration becomes easier as practice continues. They found running records to be a valuable teaching tool assists in effective guided reading planning and teaching. Reflections reveal growing confidence surrounding the use of running records to have developed through field experience opportunities.

Further, many pre-service teachers noted in their reflections that guided reading allowed them to better understand the needs of their students. Likewise, reflections showed that guided reading allowed pre-service teachers to get to know their students and also personalize the lessons. Finally, reflections revealed that pre-service teachers believed guided reading allowed them to differentiate within the small groups to better meet the needs of individual students.

Discussion

Findings reveal that paired course and field experiences allow pre-service teachers to better explain, defend importance, and feel confident to teach using these literacy skills. Pre-service teachers are able to better understand the value of the techniques of running records and guided reading, are more confident to teach using these strategies, and can more accurately define the strategies. Connections are evident between a specific assessment method and the ways in which this method drives instruction, specifically with running records and guided reading. Results of this study are consistent with previous research (Helfrich and Bean, 2011; Heibert & Morris, 2012; Retallick & Miller, 2010; Scherer, 2012), confirming that pre-service teachers, through the pairing of course and field work, through more accurate definitions, beliefs of importance and confidence within, do show enhanced understandings about best practice literacy instruction, specifically in the areas of running records and guided reading.

Data concludes that pre-service teachers' beliefs about the importance of running records and guided reading as best practice literacy instruction either increased or stayed the same throughout. At the conclusion of the course and

field experience, all pre-service teachers indicated they felt guided reading was a sound way to teach reading in small groups. Pre-service teachers' understandings of the ways in which running records are used to guide teaching, as well as their overall importance to teaching reading increased throughout the study. From the beginning to the end of the course, data also confirms pre-service teachers are better able to explain, defend, and teach using best practice literacy instruction through their opportunities to experience live teaching in their associated field. All students were able to more thoroughly define running records and guided reading from pre to post.

Limitations

While the results of the data reveal favorable insight into the ways in which paired course and field experiences can enhance best practice literacy instruction understandings among pre-service teachers, this research does have limitations. Due to the small amount of subjects in the study, more research is needed to enhance understandings about the ways in which pre-service teachers develop understandings of best practice literacy instruction. Likewise, the author-as-course instructor-and-researcher can set limitations on the findings. Further studies of the impact of pre-service teachers engaging in best practice literacy instruction through connected course and field work are warranted, as they seem to impact curriculum methods courses.

Implications

In summary, pairing course and field work proved to be a successful experience for pre-service teachers in terms of growing understandings around best practice literacy. All pre-service teachers noted both running records and guided reading to be essential strategies for teaching reading. At the end of the course and field experience, pre-service teachers had a solid understanding of how using running records as formative assessment can guide teaching decisions in small group literacy instruction in the form of guided reading. Results of this research have an impact on teacher preparation programs and highlight the importance of engaging pre-service teachers in literacy experiences that are connected to both the course and field, to better prepare them to meet the challenges of ensuring all students grow to be literate individuals.

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